

WRITE NOW

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RIGHT THE WRONG
WRITE THE WRONG

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Scenes from a Protest No. 5
Arianna Logan
(front cover)



The Gleaner is a theme-based literary journal edited by the undergraduate students at Delaware Valley University.

We showcase all forms of written work as well as artwork and photography pieces.

This year's theme is *Right the Wrong / Write the Wrong*.

Dear Reader,

The content of this issue is definitely representative of its theme. As a result, you will be exposed to a variety of creative voices and visions engaging in some uncomfortable, yet important conversations about the world around us. James Baldwin, writer and activist, once said, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." We hope that you at least experience these pages with open eyes, hearts, and minds. While the views contained in this issue do not necessarily reflect those of *The Gleaner* staff, the spirit in which it was created speaks intrinsically to who we are and what we aspire to be.

Sincerely,

The Gleaner Staff

Club participants in anti-w

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Dr. Wilbert Turner, Jr.

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DIGITAL DEATH

By Nasira Gibson

Ding.
a text.
Ding.
another.
heart-pounding, hands shaking.
i haven't even read the messages,
heavy breathing, eyes swelling.
i know what this is,
i hold my breath hoping there isn't another,
Ding.
there it is again,
the deafening tone of you breaking me,
Ding.
its as if they are getting louder.
Ding.
the dings slowly turn into gunshots
Ding.
there you go again, finger on the trigger,
Ding.
its as if you never run out of ammo,
i'm hoping for the best,
pleading, begging, uncontrollable bleeding.
Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding.
i'm already dead, heart stopped beating,
taking my last breath of life,
this is it, this is where you leave me.
i close my eyes for the last shot to come.
there i wait, palms sweating.
its as if you took your time,
guilt flooding over you,
now your heart is pounding,
hands shaking, heavy breathing, eyes swelling.
Ding.

UNEQUALLY EQUAL**By T.J. Millspaugh**

Two sides of the same coin,
One lavished and new,
The other seen as sordid, unfortunately adjoined.
They each show their histories, their mysteries, their hues.

Fixed by the shine of its glistening side
Neglected the side who's molded by time.
Heads for good luck, tails for deride
Half of this coin is way past its prime.

Though it's far from the lottery,
It's forgotten as it's spent.
This currency an artery,
Is half still worth one cent?

One penny is but one exchange,
With countless long forgotten.
Communities of unequal change
In cities and towns begotten.

They're used as a means, an end on a plat,
Unequally equal, the front and the back.

Chronicle

THE Misanthrope

ADDICTION

By *Samantha Demoy*

Addiction is a sickness not a choice
Because why would you choose to hurt the ones you love
With a bottle in your hand and tears in your eyes
Some see the bottle as something green
But you see a bottle as a sign of relief

You are tied down with a rope that could never be cut
Your wrists tied together
gripping a glass like it was a gun pointed at your head
and taking a sip was like pulling the trigger
then finding out it's empty
so you keep pulling, and pulling
because now there is nothing left to stop you

I sit, in the front seat of a car that seemed like a death trap
Your breath stench, and your eyes half closed
Speeding down the endless road
And I never knew how close I could get to a telephone pole
missing it by inches

Just because I am young does not mean I do not understand
I try to hold your hand guiding your way, because
No matter how long you try to stay sober
You will still smell wine across the room
Your mouth still waters like it's trying
To feed a flower within your mind
Reaching and trying to find sunlight
to bring light into your darkness
It will slip down into your throat
Filling your bullet wounds

My eyes have seen true pain
My eyes have seen a poisonous liquid that has
Taken the essence away from someone I love
I see you, but you
Are a ghost who has yet to move into the light
To discover a haven
That can rescue you from the burden of your thoughts

Loving an alcoholic, is like becoming an addict yourself
You say to yourself one last time,
but yet it seems to find its way back
The look in your eyes is so sharp
I can feel it pierce my skin leaving a million scars
As you smile and say I'm sorry
Damaging your liver is like damaging me
Gripping a bottle is like gripping my throat
I learned that alcohol is worse than drugs
Because it's legal

The difference between the addict
And someone who is drowning
Is that the one that's drowning knows it
And the addict will drink away the ocean
Until there is nothing but sand

My life is like a movie that's constantly replaying
Replaying the pain
Replaying the hurt
Replaying the guilt I feel when you take a sip
Because I've always thought it was my fault

Memories imprinted on my soul as if they branded me
Memories of screaming and yelling
A memory that damages me everyday
Yet you would never remember it anyway

I miss you and all you could of been
If you didn't let the alcohol allow your life to cave in

ONE NIGHT

By Jordan Burbage

Carving through shattered teeth
The citronella moon, pregnant
Waits heavy to follow me home
Because you don't want her.
I've seen it.

Everyone looks the same on the outside,
That shit-eating, empty attic stare,
Pushing her fifty miles outside of home
Just so we don't have to think about it.

I never know where she's going
But I've been there every day since.

A sand-smooth glass tempered
In the cold and cut
By the way you say its name,
Because baited wind won't blow
But she waits.

'Til it's all around her.

Chronicle

WHICH ONE?

By Justin Robertson

Lower Merion High School

11-12th Grade

1st Place

How can the world ever be on fire,
If it is made of great flowing water.
How can a person be a plain liar,
If that one is not the Devil's daughter.
How can the world sound of strident discord,
If inhabitants are tame and quiet.
How can the world be so darkly pictured,
If the painter's brush shines bright, right by it.

How can the world keep accord and order,
If everybody hates and loathes the same.
How can the pigs have their brick and mortar,
If the rabid wolf does not take the blame.
How can the world keep so calm its members,
If tainted death always ends wholesome life.
How can the world burn to its bare embers,
If it is held up by a chilling knife.

MY SINCEREST APOLOGIES

By Elena Caputo

Wilson High School

11-12th Grade

2nd Place

I'm sorry,
but I can't watch helplessly as the the world lowers its expectations
While crime, greed, and violence rise in frequency and severity.
I'm sorry,
but I can't love a world that has conquered the earth and beyond
But has yet to conquer its prejudice and stigma.

I'm sorry,
but I will not stand for the racism that refuses to stop spreading
For it has become a plague in its own right
infectious and lethal in equal measure.
I'm sorry,
but I refuse to watch children mock each other
Because children are not born with hate in their hearts--hate is taught.

I'm sorry,
but I would rather teach a little girl to be Wonder Woman
Than to teach her to wait for her Prince Charming to show up.
I'm sorry,
but I would rather teach a little boy that it is okay to cry
Than to tell him to "man up" and go back to his bench presses.

I'm sorry,
but I hate to see the athletes that rule the school shame those who don't,
Casting doubt in the minds of the "nerds"
who will far surpass their tormentors in the real world.
I'm sorry,
but rape is caused by rapists, not mini-skirts or drunkenness;
Yet in this country,
it is more shameful to be assaulted than to be the assaulter.

I'm sorry,
but I can't sit idly by as the world breaks more and more by the hour,
Not when we've built bigger houses but still have too many broken homes.
I'm sorry,
but I don't know why owning a dog is more regulated than owning a gun
And I definitely don't know how many more have to die for that to change.

I'm sorry,
but I can't listen to you talk about justice in the world
Not when there is none to be found.

I'm sorry,
but I can't apologize for what I have to say
Because I will never be truly sorry.

A MAN MAKING THE PRESIDENT'S WAGE

By Lincoln Mader

Cinnaminson Community High School

9-10th Grade

1st Place

A man making the President's wage
from birth could grow and die of old age
without obtaining anywhere near
the wealth that Jeff Bezos earns in a year

Meanwhile, a poor man will groan and moan
slaving to pay off his student loans.
And with his last breath, he'll say with glee
"At least in death I'll be debt-free!"

"That's just how it is. It'll never get better,"
the swamp tells us, growing grosser and wetter
and grosser and wetter than ever before,
seeking to fulfill their hunger for more.

There's the issue: the obsession with greed.
The wanting of wants, not the needing of needs.
A normal man tells himself: "Someday I will
be the ruler of rulers; the king of the hill!"

In truth, he's not destined to reach those heights.
He's likely better off ending his life
and hoping that he'll be reborn as the kid
of a man who's inexplicably rich.

The game is rigged, folks. You don't have a chance.
You'll be perpetually stuck in a trance
thinking that maybe a billionaire
will look at your standing and actually care
about how you've been cheated and beaten and bruised
by this lifelong hypnosis that's been just a ruse
for rich people to continue their ploy
to keep poor people as their powerless toys.

L.I.F.E.L.I.N.E.

By Devin Sparwasser

*Quakertown Community High School
9-10th Grade
2nd Place*

Good times come and good times go,
Falling petals from a rose.
When you think it's here to stay,
It turns around and goes away.

The sepia sky seems full of light,
Then comes the dappled dark of night.
My faith and pride, they wave goodbye,
Mute tears stream down, I start to cry.

And then I wonder, while I think,
About how it's all began to sink.
The wind will chill,
The leaves have changed,
Why is it all fading away?

But then, as I reach my final clasp,
The light appears within my grasp.

Reach out your hand, hold onto me,
The spark to your epiphany.
Just stay with me and you will see,
That life is more than what you see.
L.I.F.E.L.I.N.E.

nts march on the capitol

Participants in anti-war protest despite cold temperatures

Thousands of anti-war demonstrators gathered in front of the capitol building in Washington, D.C., on Saturday, November 9, 1963, to protest the escalation of the Vietnam War. The demonstrators, many of whom were young people, held signs and banners demanding an end to the war and the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam. The protest was one of the largest in the history of the anti-war movement in the United States.



Nation Sees Biggest Protest to Viet War

WASHINGTON, Nov. 10 (AP) — A massive anti-war demonstration is expected to take place in front of the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C., on Saturday, Nov. 9. The demonstration, which is being organized by the National Student Reluctance to Fight in Vietnam Committee, is expected to be the largest in the history of the anti-war movement in the United States. The demonstrators, many of whom are young people, are expected to hold signs and banners demanding an end to the war and the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam.

Police Arrest 69

Sign Capitalists

It is not your approval that I am searching for, it is my own.
Emily Keene

"I do not write with the pencil, I write with the brush. It is not words that I compose, but if you listen close enough you can still hear them. We were raised in a society that made us believe we were never enough, and the scars covering our self confidence still split open from time to time. Every day is a journey towards a healthier relationship with yourself, and I assure you, even the bad days are worth it."

Do you think student activism is dead?

The Daily Tar Heel

1,500 march in Raleigh

protest war escalation

Chronicle

Volume 11

march on the

ates in anti-war protest despite

protest 63

Students march on the capitol

Students demonstrate in anti-war protest despite cold temperatures

Thursday, May 12, 1966

Missoula, Montana

10¢



The Daily Tar Heel
1,500 march in Raleigh
protest war escalation

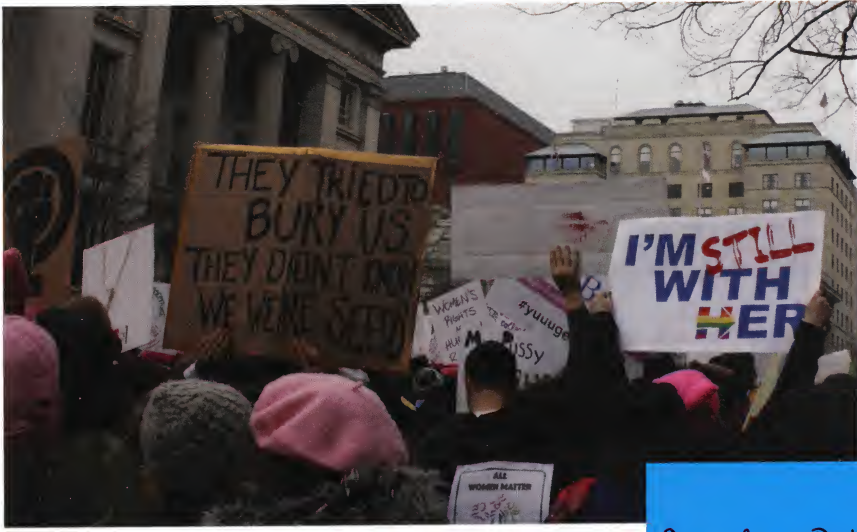




Scenes from a Protest No. 1
Arianna Logan

Scenes from a Protest No. 2
Arianna Logan





Scenes from a Protest No. 3

Arianna Logan



Scenes from a Protest No. 4

Arianna Logan



Somewhere
Arianna Logan





PART 1 • Second Edition
The Digital Photography Book
step-by-step secrets for how to
make your photos look like the pros



Candy Wrapper in the Woods
Veronica Feibusch



Aftermath of New Year's
Veronica Feibusch



Littler Snake
Veronica Feibusch



Brick

Arianna Logan

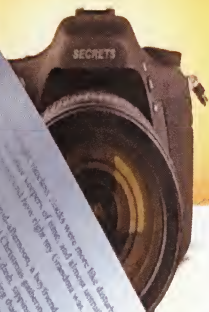
Faceless

By Arianna Logan

The Digital Photography Book

PART 1 • Second Edition

The step-by-step secrets for how to make your photos look like the pros'



THE #1 SELLING DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY BOOK EVER



Is All You Need
Arianna Logan



The Gleaner



THEY'LL DO WONDERFUL THINGS

By Lizmary Ortiz

I find it peculiar that the car swiveled off the road.

It didn't just begin to drift off; the car did a full circle on its own. It felt as if some sort of force had pushed against it, and we were suddenly the victims of a ruthless game of pinball. I didn't even have time to react. My head was suddenly thrown forward, and the motion sent my mind whirling. The windshield caved in on me, and I realized that the car had pierced through the weak traffic barrier on the side of the highway. The car flipped onto its back and began to spiral, rolling me around inside like clothing in a dryer. I couldn't feel any of it. I saw flashes of the sky, and then the car. Over and over again.

Then, it stopped.

I was lying in the snow now, but I noticed that it felt more like a supple mattress than a layer of frozen crystals. I felt moisture on my head, and I tried reaching up to touch it. My hand wouldn't move. Somewhere beside me, there was the sound of buzzing. I could only guess that it was midnight now. I wondered for a second whether or not my car insurance would cover this. Then, I pondered over what I would tell Kylie, and if she would still be mad at me.

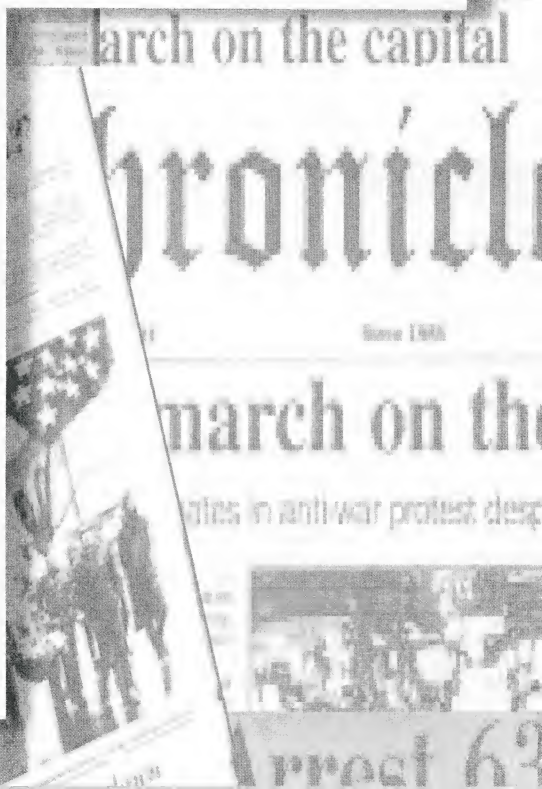
The last thing I managed to think of, just as the night closed in, was whether or not it was December 15th, or if it was December 16th. And then

the darkness finally cascaded over me, like the blanket that a mother would use to cover her child on a cold night such as this.

"You slept in again."

I rolled over in my bed, refusing to open my eyes. "How did you get in?" My voice sounded muffled through my thick blanket.

"You do know that your house has me registered as a constant visitor," Kylie said matter-of-factly. I felt the vibrations of her footsteps as she came closer to me, with the constant clicking of her heels



making a sort of melody against my wooden floors.

"So, now you can come in whenever you want?"

Kylie yanked the bed covers off of me, and I groaned in defeat. Opening my eyes, I finally allowed myself to fully wake up.

"Duh, that's how the facial recognition system works." Kylie sat on the edge of my bed, her eyes not focused on me. She was staring intently at her phone as she spoke, her manicured fingers rapidly tapping away at its screen. "Or did you forget how the product that you paid for functions?"

I did, actually. I couldn't seem to remember ever having such a system in my house. I brushed it off as a side-effect of my current state of drowsiness. I had never been much of a morning person. "Whatever," I said, dropping the subject. Trying to recall when I bought the security system was giving me a headache. I reached up and massaged the side of my head.

"Are you ready to go, or not?"

I looked up at Kylie, with my hand still stroking the spot that seemed to be hurting. It pulsed underneath my touch.

"Excuse me, are you deaf?" Kylie finally tore her eyes from her cell phone and looked up at me. I immediately dropped my hand.

"Yeah, I'm ready," I affirmed. I didn't

want her to think that something was wrong.

Kylie nodded approvingly. "Ok, then let's bounce. Try to actually dress nicely today, or else I'm going to refuse to walk next to you."

I felt a mild stab of offense, but pushed it aside. "Where are we going, exactly?"

"Do you never check your messages?" Kylie stood up and threw her hands in the air, obviously irritated. "We're going to the mall."

"How exactly was I supposed to check my messages if I was asleep?" She was starting to get on my nerves with her attitude, but I couldn't quite figure out why.



Something about her demeanor was bothering me. Regardless, this seemed to be how she normally acted.

"If you have a phone, then that means you can be contacted whenever and wherever," Kylie scolded. "There's no way for you to not see the messages, asleep or not."

"What if I don't want to be disturbed?" I questioned dryly.

"In this day and age," she remarked, "that's impossible."

"Damnit!"

The crystal vase on top of the table shattered against the floor, sending shards of glass everywhere. I took a deep breath in an attempt to contain my annoyance as Kylie snickered.

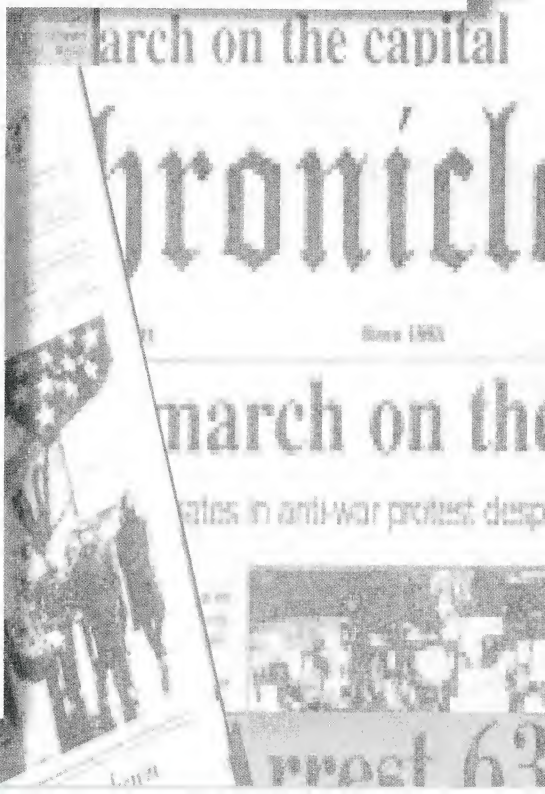
"What are you even looking for?" Kylie stood in front of a mirror in the corridor of my house. The bulbs outlining the mirror had automatically adjusted their levels of light when she approached it, giving her the perfect lighting to be able to fix her makeup. I slammed the drawer I had been looking in shut, opened the next one, and then began to rummage through it. I could've sworn that I had left my car keys there.

"Something that should be here," I mumbled distractedly.

"Okay then," she muttered. Kylie sighed and gave her bottom lip one

more swatch of her dark purple lipstick. I pretended not to hear her. It's not like she was going to try to help me, anyway. She ran one of her long, acrylic nails against the edges of her mouth. The lining of her lipstick was now impeccable. With one final smack of her lips, she was finally satisfied with her work. She then proceeded to take out her mascara and start messing with her false lashes.

I slammed the drawer shut and finally gave up on finding my keys. "How do you feel about walking?" I asked sarcastically as I bent down to start picking up the fragments of glass. I quickly withdrew my hand as a small, circular object sped into the room. It slid over the debris from the vase and made a quiet humming noise. And then,



just as quickly as it had come, it sped away. The floor was immaculate. Considerably puzzled, I decided not to question what the circular object was.

It turns out that I couldn't find the keys to my car because my car didn't have keys. The car was self-driving, and turned on automatically as soon as I neared it. I had to place my hand on the door's security pad in order for it to scan my prints, and only then would it unlock its doors. Kylie laughed when she saw my look of bewilderment as the car began to reverse out of the driveway on its own. It paused when another car rolled down the street, and then continued once it was gone.

"You're acting as if you've never been in this car before," she teased. It felt as if I hadn't.

"Yo, Kylie!"

Kylie glanced up quickly from her phone and looked across the food court. Her 'bae', Andre, waved at her from the line at one of the restaurants. On his left arm was some girl, whom Kylie had seen in a store earlier and lovingly referred to as a 'trifling tramp'. Kylie stuck up the middle finger of her right hand at him, her other hand still occupied with the text she had been in the middle of sending. I noticed her slight frown as she quickly looked back down at her phone. We had spotted them walking around the mall earlier, and Kylie hoped aloud that we would be able to avoid the awkward encounter. Andre

smiled slyly in Kylie's direction, and then turned his attention back to the girl he was with. He didn't bother making eye contact with me.

"Trifling tramp," Kylie mumbled. I hummed in agreement, but the whole exchange really troubled me, for some reason. As I tried to sort my thoughts, Kylie let out a tortured wail.

"My lipstick is fading! I had to do a favor for Andre just to make him buy this color for me, and it's already proving to be a piece of crap."

"What favor did he make you do?" I absentmindedly scrolled through my numerous social media accounts, not really paying attention to Kylie's makeup tragedy.



I couldn't seem to focus on any of the content, everything just seemed blurry. Apparently, I had over a thousand people that followed me. I wondered how I could know all of these people personally.

Kylie leaned towards me, going right through her holographic mirror. She hid her mouth with one hand and made an obscene gesture with the other. I grimaced in disgust.

"Thank you for the vivid imagery."

"I hate doing it. My surgeon said that it causes expression lines." Kylie sighed. "He doesn't make that trifling tramp do things like that for him. He just buys her whatever she wants."

"That's not fair to you," I said. Why would she allow herself to be treated this way?

"Can we talk about something else?" Kylie mumbled, tilting her phone for a different angle for her pictures. I was beginning to grow aggravated.

"No, he can't just cheat right in your face." I kept my voice strong yet low, as the people around us had no business knowing our personal lives. Even though they were all looking down at their cellphones, I was still wary of them. "You're his girlfriend, right? He should be treating you a lot better."

"Please, drop it."

I kept on. "He needs to learn to respect his relationship with you. He

can't just use you whenever he feels like it."

"I said drop it."

"But you're his—"

Kylie slammed her phone on the table, her eyes sharp with rage. "I'm not his girlfriend! She is!" The sound of the impact her phone made resonated throughout the food court. Vibrations shot up from the table and into my body, reawakening a dull pulse in my head. No one around us even flinched. I didn't know what to say. I had assumed that Andre was cheating on her, but Kylie was the other woman.

"I-I'm sorry," I stammered.



"I knew he had a girlfriend when I matched with him online, and I knew that he wouldn't leave her for me," Kylie said, her voice now lower than a whisper. "I figured that since everyone cheats, I might as well just put up with it."

I was dumbfounded. "So, you just let him use you?"

Kylie's eyes sparked with offense, but then softened. She knew it was the truth. "Any man that I'm with will do the same thing," she said. Her voice quavered with woe.

"That's how things are," Kylie whispered.

I sat quiet as Kylie began to shake. She was showing more emotion now than she had so far this entire day. Her botox injected cheeks trembled, and were suddenly stained with one sole, black tear. The throb in my head grew stronger, but I ignored it. A lump of guilt formed in my throat, choking me into feeling like a criminal for having interrogated Kylie. How did I not know what her relationship with Andre was really like? I reached over and grasped one of Kylie's dainty hands, which was still hovering over her phone. Claspings it in mine, I squeezed as hard as I could.

"He doesn't deserve you," I whispered.

Kylie's breath caught in her throat for a second, and she looked up to meet my gaze. She stared at me with such a passionate look of bewilderment that I couldn't help but ask myself whether

or not that concept was foreign to her. Kylie's mouth opened slightly, as if she was about to ask me something. Then, her eyes drifted to something behind me. Kylie abruptly snatched her hand away from me, grabbing her phone as she did so. She clutched the phone tightly, so much so that her knuckles turned white. I was caught off guard by her expression. She was looking me dead in the eyes, with no visible emotion showing on her face.

"That's how things are," Kylie said in a monotone voice. "So, just drop it."

I sat quiet as she stared at me, with her eyes as glassy and blank as a dead cell-phone screen. She was looking at me, but then she wasn't. There was no holographic mirror



in front of her for me to excuse her gaze. The throbbing began to match the beating of my heart, which was steadily increasing. Something wasn't right.

"Hey!"

I jerked in my seat as a loud, masculine voice came from behind me. I swiveled around and looked up to see Andre smiling good-naturedly at us. The 'trifling tramp' wasn't by his side.

"What are you two doing here?"

I quickly composed myself and gave him a civil, yet strained smile. He was such a jerk.

"Just killing time," I replied. Andre gave me a subtle look of confusion before faking a polite grin. "Lit," he remarked, faking interest.

"Uh, lit indeed," I confirmed, nodding awkwardly. Kylie said nothing. I didn't dare turn to look at her. Andre's gaze shifted to Kylie and his smile faltered slightly. For a second, I hoped that he would maybe apologize to her. No one spoke for what seemed like forever.

"Your mascara's running," Andre finally said.

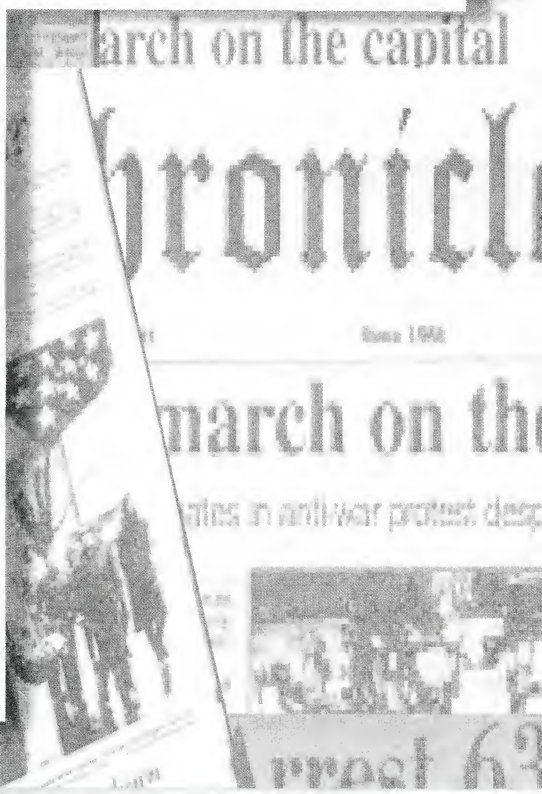
"I was just about to fix it!" I heard Kylie reply, as cheerful as ever. "This place is giving me really bad allergies." In an attempt to support her lie, I lamely faked a snuffle. Andre gave me a sideways glance, before

looking back at Kylie.

"You better go fix it," he scolded, just as he turned to walk away. "You look awful." Kylie gave Andre the fakest laugh I had ever heard. My eyes followed his retreating figure as he walked over to the table where his actual girlfriend was sitting.

"That's how it is," Kylie said quietly. I turned back around and saw her wiping away her smudged mascara. Kylie's eyes were focused on the holographic mirror yet again, still as blank as they were before.

"If I told you to find a monogamous relationship in this day and age, you would die trying," she said resentfully.



"And why is that?" I stared intently at her, yet Kylie refused to meet my gaze.

"Because, I could link up with my side guy while sitting right next to you," she replied. Kylie shut off her mirror and finally looked over at me. Her makeup was flawless yet again. She gave me an unnatural grin.

"Haven't you heard? Infidelity is in this season." The people around us agreed. They continued typing away on their phones, sending sensual messages to their lovers as their spouses sat next to them doing the same.

Kylie reminded me after we left the mall that we had a get-together to go to tonight.

"It's December 15th!" She exclaimed in disbelief. "Did you really forget about the holiday party we go to on this day every single year? I texted you about it all day yesterday, so don't say this was last minute." My mind drew a blank. I smiled sheepishly at her. I leaned back into the heated seats of my car and shrugged it off as it drove us home to change for the party.

The party was seemingly in full swing when we arrived. Kylie and I got out of the car, both of us holding the bottles of liquor that we had bought earlier for the host. He was one of my best friends, apparently. As we reached the front door, it slid open. I could hear loud, techno music

echoing in the house. It consisted only of high-pitched beats, and had no words.

"Welcome. Please remove your footwear," a robotic voice boomed from above us. Kylie kicked off her snow-covered heels without question, and I took off my shoes too.

"Put them in," Kylie said.

"Put them in what?" I looked around the room, confused. All that I saw was a clear box sitting next to the front door. "Put it in that?"

Kylie rolled her eyes. "What is up with you today? Yes, put them there!"

I frowned, but complied. I stuffed



my snow-filled shoes into the box, and Kylie did the same with her heels. I stood back and watched as the box suddenly lit up. The clear box turned dark red, and the snow began to rapidly melt off of the shoes. My mouth fell agape as I witnessed how the shoes were then blow dried. The box then turned clear again, and its top slid open. Kylie reached in and grabbed her heels. They were perfectly dry now. My shoes were in the same condition.

"Hurry, they're expecting us," Kylie said quickly. She slipped on her pumps, and I followed suit. The shoes felt brand new. I wouldn't have guessed that they were covered in snow just a few seconds ago. Kylie began to strut down the hallway, her heels click-clacking against the marble floors. I noticed that the walls of the corridor were completely bare. They reminded me of the hallways in a hospital, empty and slightly foreboding. At the end of the main hallway, there was a single door on the left. That door led to the party, I guessed. Next to the door was a metal staircase, which would lead us to the bedrooms upstairs.

"How does my hair look?" Kylie asked, fixing the straps of her silver, velvet dress.

"Hair-sprayed to perfection," I replied, as she desired. Kylie gave me a grateful smile. The door slid open and revealed a dimly lit room. The music sounded louder now. In the room, there was a crowd of people. They were all dressed up in fancy, high-end clothing. Their hairstyles

were all perfect. And they were all looking down at their phones.

"We've arrived!" Kylie announced, lifting the bottle of wine she brought. No one looked up. Suddenly, a girl came running over to Kylie. She held her phone up high, with its flash beaming directly at us. "Bestie!" The girl screeched, her bleach-white teeth gleaming in the dark room. Kylie gave her a fake smile.

"Here's my queen, the one I love the most. Slay me girl," the girl said, her high-pitched voice piercing my ears. Kylie gave her a swift kiss on the cheek and kept her gaze on the phone's camera. It was all an act.

"I love you too, queen," Kylie chirped. She sounded like she was



reciting lines from a play she had acted in several times before. She could've fooled anyone. The flash from the phone suddenly cut off, and then the girl abruptly pulled away from Kylie. She looked down at her phone and quickly began typing away.

"Tag me in that," Kylie told her. The girl nodded and then silently walked away.

"Oh my god, slay me girl!" She began the same charade again, this time with another girl that was sitting down on the couch. The girl looked up at the camera, gave a million-dollar smile, and then flipped her hair seductively over her shoulder. After all, the cameras were on, and she needed to give the audience a show.

"What was that?" I asked Kylie.

"It's for her Insta," she said distractedly. She was now looking down at her phone, too. I hummed, pretending to know what that was. "Well," I began after a few seconds. "I'm going to find the host and give him the bottles." Kylie handed me the wine she was holding, still not bothering to look up at me. Frowning, I grabbed it and walked away from her.

The dark room shone briefly in a shade of blue, and then in a shade of green. There was some sort of light projector on the ceiling, and it turned on in intervals. At first glance, it would look like the party was on. It was when you saw the people, all hunched over their illuminated cell

phones, that you realized that there was no real partying occurring here. I walked through the crowd of people, trying to make my way to what seemed to be the kitchen. In it, there was a small group of guys absorbed with their phones.

"Do you guys know where Stefan is?" No one replied. Sighing, I turned to leave the kitchen. "He's in the living room, next to the speakers," one of the guys finally said. I was just there, how could I have missed him? When I went up to him, Stefan gave me just about the warmest welcome I could've expected. He simply began recording on his phone and babbling on about how I was 'the real one.' I offered a strained smile as the flash blinded me.



"Yo, guys!" Stefan called for the attention of everyone in the living room. "Ain't this it?" He held up one of the bottles of liquor in the air. Everyone looked up from their phones and cheered, quickly snapping their own photos of the scene. Snap, snap, was all I could hear around me. I was beginning to feel claustrophobic. I desperately searched the crowd for Kylie, but she was nowhere to be found. I turned around and left the room, leaving behind the endless flashes of light. What was I doing here?

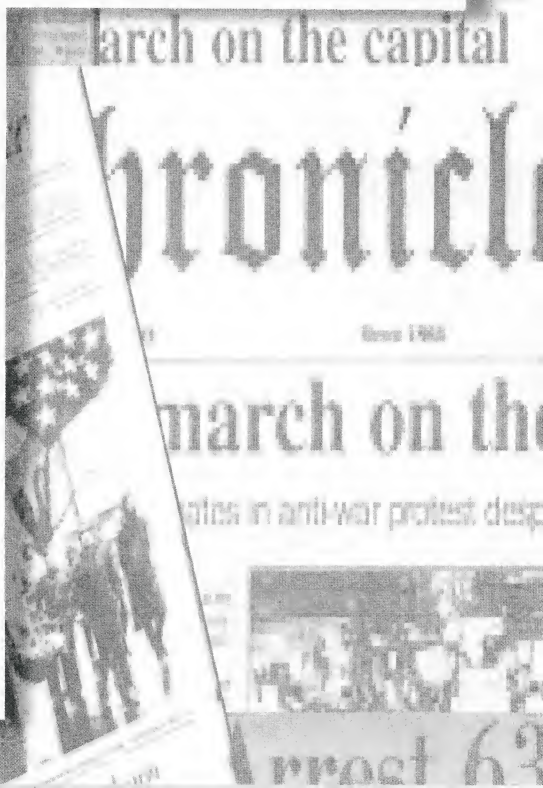
It was pretty late now. I couldn't find Kylie. About half an hour had passed by, and I managed to find refuge in an empty room upstairs. The music continued to blare from downstairs, and I could hear the distant sounds of cheering. I had no idea what was going on. The chanting abruptly stopped and I could picture everyone looking back down at their phones, eager to post whatever had just happened.

I stooped to entertaining myself with my phone, scrolling down one of my feeds. I came across a few videos from the party I was at. They made the party seem like it was full of dancing and fun. It really wasn't, but whatever the internet saw was what the party had to have been like. If it looked fun, that's what it must've been. Right? I rolled my eyes and continued swiping through the videos.

"Go girl! Aye! Get it!" A loud, annoying voice blasted from my

phone. I squinted, trying to see who the person was referring to. My heart stopped when I saw Kylie was making out with some guy, her iridescent lipstick smudging all over his face. A lump formed in my throat as I could see the figures of people beside her, cheering her on. "Aye! Aye!" Kylie gave the person recording a sideways glance, and winked.

I closed the app swiftly, refusing to see more. My chest swelled with anger. "I'm sick of this," I said, gritting my teeth together. She was no better than the rest of them. I found myself exhausted and alone, sitting on the floor of a stranger's guest bedroom. I was an outsider stuck in the middle of a charade, an understudy stuck with the lead after not having rehearsed the script. I



wanted out.

I stood up and walked out of the bedroom, my phone clenched tightly in my hand. I quickly made my way down the stairs, trying to leave as swiftly and discreetly as possible. Kylie could stay, for all I cared. As I got to the end of the staircase, I bumped into the guy I had spoken to in the kitchen. He looked at me with bloodshot eyes.

"Sorry, man," he said, his words slurred with drunkenness.

"Whatever," I muttered trying to walk around him. I stopped dead in my tracks. His mouth was covered in smudged, iridescent lipstick. No, that couldn't be...

"Baby, wait for me," I heard a familiar, feminine voice say. Kylie came from the living room, her gaze fixed down on her phone. I stared at her incredulously. "I hope you have a-" Kylie froze as she finally looked up and met my gaze. Her eyes widened with surprise and embarrassment. The faint trace of her shimmering lipstick was noticeable on her lips. I gave her a look of pure disgust.

"Wait, I can explain," Kylie said hurriedly, as I pushed past her. I heard the drunk guy mumbling behind me, saying something about us all having a good time together. I sped-walked down the hallway, refusing to look back at Kylie. I wanted out. I was sick of the hypocrisy; I was sick of the falsity of everything around me.

"Aye! Kill 'em!" I heard people chanting from the living room yet again. The music continued to play thunderously. I willed for someone to shut it off. It was giving me a headache. I quickly reached the front door, and nearly crashed into it. The automatic sliding function was working slowly, and I grew frustrated with it. Kylie's footsteps followed behind me.

"Wait, where are you going?" She cried behind me. I didn't turn around. I couldn't bear to face her. She was just like everyone else in that room, if not worse. I couldn't handle that fact, but I knew that it was true. She was a woman of her time.

"Have him drive you home, since you enjoy his company so much," I



said briskly. Kylie's footsteps stopped abruptly, and I heard her inhale sharply.

"Screw you," she whispered, her voice shaking. I clenched my fists tightly. "Who are you to judge me?"

"No one, I guess," I replied dryly. I turned and looked at her disappointedly. She had the likeness of a supermodel, with her curvaceous figure and impeccably curled hair. She was just like every other woman, and that drunk guy was just like every other man. The only odd one out here was me. "Enjoy the rest of the party," I muttered curtly. Then, I turned and stepped out into the wintry night. The door slid shut behind me, acting as the curtain call for the show that had just ended. And what a show it was.

I sat in the leather seats of my car, still shaking... not from the cold, but from the overwhelming feeling of desperation that came over me. I wanted to go anywhere, anywhere that wasn't here.

"Destination," the GPS prompted robotically. I had the urge to snatch the steering wheel and take control of the car myself. I wanted to floor the gas and just drive anywhere or nowhere. But, I couldn't do that. The car didn't even have gas pedals for me to manage. The steering wheel was there for decoration.

"Home?" the system suggested when I remained silent. "Head west on the highway," I finally decided. I wanted

to follow something familiar. The sun always set west, and nothing could change that. Maybe that would take me somewhere familiar, somewhere that felt a little more homely than this city. The car obliged, driving itself out and away from Stefan's house. I didn't look back.

My phone was still clenched in my hand. Bzz. It suddenly vibrated quietly. I clenched my teeth and tilted the screen towards me, checking to see who it was. It was Kylie. I decided to ignore her message. I could care less if she was mad. She had no right to be. She had proved to me that she was a fake, just like everyone else. My head began to throb again as I remembered the look on her face when I caught her with that guy. It



was the irrefutable look of guilt, and rightfully so. She cried over Andre's cheating, and here she was messing with strangers at parties. Anger swelled in me.

"Faster," I instructed the car forcefully. The car adjusted its speed accordingly, going from 55 to 75. We were on the highway now, and I was relieved to see that it was empty. It was pretty late, after all. There were about five minutes left till midnight.

Bzz. The phone continued. Bzz. The pulse in my head suddenly grew stronger, turning into a sharp pinch. I groaned and gripped my phone tighter. Bzz. It went again. "Stop," I whispered, speaking to the phone. "Shut up."

Bzz. Bzz. The sharp throb came again and I cried out, leaning forward and clutching my head. My seatbelt stopped me from leaning any farther, and rubbed against my neck.

"Do not remove the seatbelt while riding," the car reminded me. I fell back against the seat, still grasping my head. The throb kept on, and I flinched at each stab of pain.

Bzz. Bzz. "Make it stop," I murmured. "Please, make it stop." If you have a phone, then that means you can be contacted whenever and wherever. Kylie's words suddenly came into my mind. They rang with truth.

Bzz. Bzz. "Just stop!" I screamed in anger. I slammed my hand against the dashboard of the car, quivering with

panic. Why wouldn't it stop?

"Do you want to stop the ride?" the car questioned innocently. I let out a tortured groan.

"No, go faster," I yelled. I wanted to get out of here. I could escape the noise, if I tried hard enough. I could leave everything behind. I just had to keep heading west. I would find something, eventually.

The car sped up yet again. "This speed is not advised for these weather conditions," it commented. I didn't care. The snow fell slightly outside, hardly doing anything to anyone. We would be fine.

"Faster," I demanded. We were going ninety now.



Bzz. Bzz. Smiling madly, I brought the phone up to my eyes. I stared into it as its screen lit up with message after message. I didn't bother reading what they said.

"I control you, you don't control me," I said to it. We sped past a highway sign, which read 'Virtual Gentlemen's Club experience! Beats the real thing!' The suggestive outline of a woman stood next to the text. The sign disappeared behind us.

"I don't have to answer you," I continued. The phone remained silent. "So, shut up."

My phone listened, staying quiet. My smile widened manically. The painful throb in my skull kept on. Bzz, the phone said again. I let out an angry cry and slammed the phone against the dashboard. "Shut up! Shut up!"

Bzz. Bzz. The phone wasn't lighting up anymore, yet I could still hear the buzzing noise. It persisted in my mind, surrounding and suffocating me like thick smoke. I could feel its vibrations shoot up my arm. "Just stop it!" I screamed. "Shut up!"

Bzz. Bzz. Bzz. "Damn you! Stop!"

And then, the world shifted. We weren't facing west anymore.

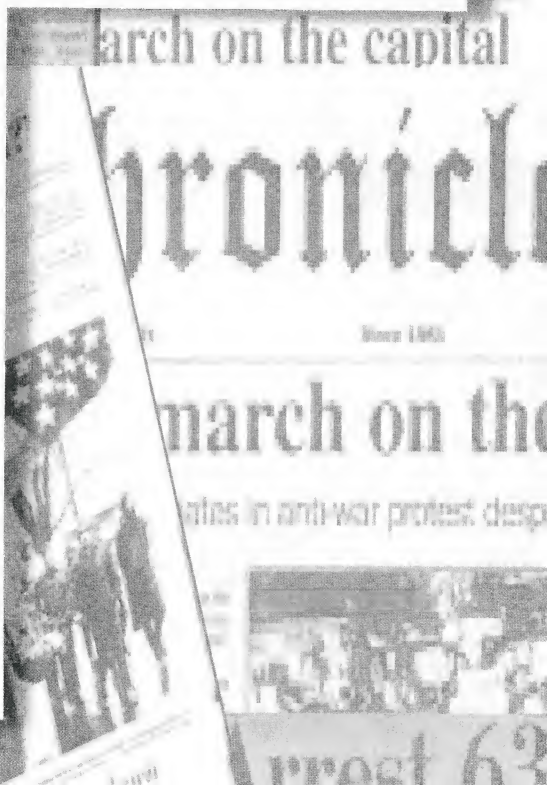
I find it peculiar that the car swiveled off the road.

It didn't just begin to drift off; the car did a full circle on its own. It felt as if some sort of force had pushed against

it, and we were suddenly the victims of a ruthless game of pinball. I didn't even have time to react. My head was suddenly thrown forward, and the motion sent my mind whirling. The windshield caved in on me, and I realized that the car had pierced through the weak traffic barrier on the side of the highway. The car flipped onto its back and began to spiral, rolling me around inside like clothing in a dryer. I couldn't feel any of it. I saw flashes of the sky, and then the car. Over and over again.

Then, it stopped.

I was lying in the snow now, but I noticed that it felt more like a supple mattress than a layer of frozen crystals. I felt moisture on my head, and I tried reaching up



to touch it. My hand wouldn't move. Somewhere beside me, there was the sound of buzzing. I could only guess that it was midnight now. I wondered for a second whether or not my car insurance would cover this. Then, I pondered over what I would tell Kylie, and whether or not she would still be mad at me.

The last thing I managed to think of, just as the night closed in, was whether or not it was December 15th, or if it was December 16th. And then the darkness finally cascaded over me, like the blanket that a mother would use to cover her child on a cold night such as this.

Bzzzzzz. Bzzzzzz.

The buzzing hummed in my ears. It sounded different now. I flinched at the sound, and willed for it to go away.

"Are... you awake?" a faint, feminine voice asked. I tried to open my eyes to see who it was, but they felt heavy. I could only manage to twitch them. The distinct sound of pacing reached my ears. I thought I recognized who was talking.

"Kylie?" My voice managed to come out in a muted whisper. My lips felt dry and cracked, as I tried to lick them. My tongue was just as dry. "Kylie," I tried again, this time hearing my voice come out stronger. I managed to open my eyes and found myself gazing up at a white ceiling. There was a fan on it, going around

in circles as it made that familiar buzzing noise. I leaned my head forward, searching the room for Kylie. She was wearing a baggy sweatshirt with jeans, and her boots looked worn. Her lips weren't a shade of dark purple, but instead were their natural shade of pink.... She wasn't wearing makeup at all. I was mystified.

"What's going on?" I grew confused. "Where are we?"

Kylie smiled happily at me before rushing over to my side and pulling me into a deep embrace. It was then that I noticed that I was hooked up to an ICU.

"You're awake!" She exclaimed, tears of joy welling up in her eyes. She hugged me tightly, and I tried



my best to hug her back. I was in the hospital. The tube connected to my arm began to pinch me, and I tried shifting it.

"The car...?" I mumbled. Kylie pulled out of the hug and sat on the edge of the hospital bed. She was still looking at me with that look of genuine happiness. She grabbed my hand and clenched it tightly. The steady sound of my heartbeat resonated through the monitor next to the bed, interrupting the room's comfortable silence.

"You were in an accident," she said quietly. "I tried paging you, and you got distracted while driving." Kylie sniffled, giving me a look of guilt. "The cops said that you must have lost control of your car because of the ice on the road. You hit a slippery patch the wrong way and just—"

"—Swiveled off the road," I finished. Kylie nodded, her gaze shifting down to her hands.

"Thankfully, you didn't suffer any serious injuries," she continued. "It's kind of weird, actually. You hardly got hurt." Kylie looked at me oddly, before shrugging. That would be a mystery neither of us could ever explain. But there was another thing that was bothering me. It was a small detail that I couldn't help but question.

"I thought you were texting me," I muttered, trying to piece together my fragmented memory. I remembered the buzzing of my cell phone as the text messages kept coming through.

I don't think that Kylie had ever actually called.

"Texting?" Kylie looked up, a look of confusion plastered on her face. "What's that?"

"What do you mean 'what's texting'?" I asked in astonishment. "You do it every five seconds!"

Kylie frowned. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Show me your phone," I demanded. What was her problem? Had she decided to act this way in order to mess with me?

Kylie gave me an odd look before standing up. She walked over to a table by my bed and reached into what I guessed was her purse. It



was a different one than I had last seen her with. Out of the bag, she pulled out a small, black object. "You mean this?"

And then, my mind cleared. I remembered everything.

"That's your beeper," I said, with wonder filling my voice. I saw the dim, green screen, and the stiff, round buttons. Memories of me checking my beeper suddenly resurfaced in my mind. "And I...have one just like it."

"Duh," Kylie said sarcastically. "How else would anyone reach you?"

The corners of my mouth began to tilt upward, and my pulse quickened. "We don't have cell-phones?"

"Cell-what?" Kylie looked at me incredulously. "Are you okay? Should I go get a nurse?" Kylie's gaze shifted to the doorway, and she frowned. "You might still be a little disoriented."

I grinned, and my heart swelled with joy. None of it had really happened. There was no such thing as social media, or holographic mirrors, or self-driving cars. I had gotten into the accident because I had lost control of the car, not because my car had lost control of itself. It was all just...

"...a bad dream," I murmured to myself. Kylie looked at me worriedly.

"I'm going to go get a nurse," she said. "You're still recovering from the accident, you need to be checked out."

I nodded absently as Kylie began to walk out of the room. Then, a question came to my mind.

"Kylie!" I called out to her, my voice now strong and clear. Kylie turned and looked at me expectantly.

"What day is it?" I asked her hurriedly.

Kylie gave me a small smile. "It's December 16th." With that thought, she turned and walked out of the room in search of a nurse.

I burst into gleeful laughter. I fell back onto the hospital bed and let myself sink into the soft pillow. An immense weight lifted off of me. My ribs hurt a bit from laughing, but I ignored the pain. Few moments in this world are more blissful than



waking up from a nightmare. Nothing can explain the childlike kind of joy that comes from realizing that it was nothing more than a twisted version of reality that would never, and could never occur.

"Let's talk more about the Internet. Every month, it's growing by leaps and bounds. How is this new communications web going to affect the way we live in the future?"

An unfamiliar voice resonated from my living room. I paused, setting aside the knife I had been using to cut up some vegetables for dinner.

"What are they giving right now?" I called out to Kylie, who was watching TV from my couch.

"Come here, quick!"

I groaned and walked to the living room. Kylie welcomed me by throwing a piece of popcorn at my head.

"They're interviewing that tech guy!" she grinned excitedly and patted the cushion next to her. I jumped onto the couch and stole some popcorn. I had vaguely heard of him. Munching on the buttery popcorn, I relaxed into the soft cushions of my sofa.

"I want to build really good tools that I know in my gut and my heart will be valuable. And then whatever happens is... you can't really predict exactly what will happen, but you can feel the direction that we're going. And that's

about as close as you can get."

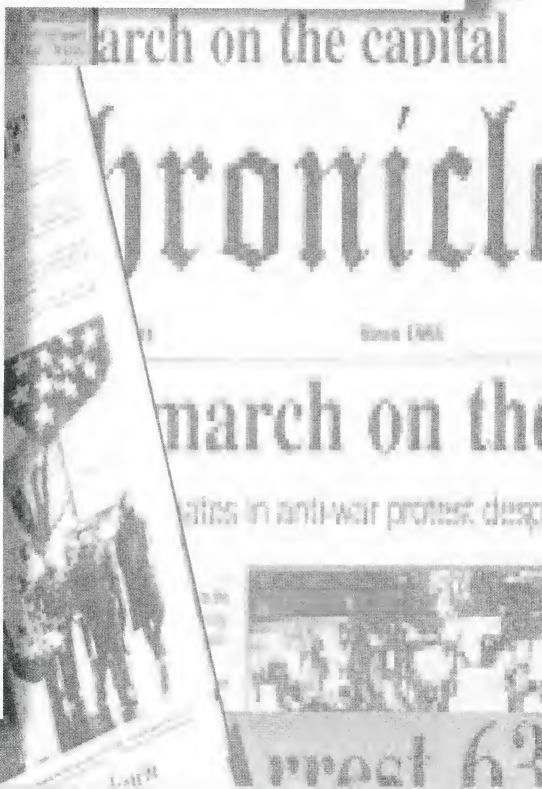
A different voice came from the TV. Onscreen, I saw a man with dark hair and weird, circular glasses. "Is that him?" I asked Kylie.

She nodded and threw another piece of popcorn in her mouth. "Shut up and listen, they're talking about something revolutionary," Kylie demanded, her voice muffled through her chewing.

"And what exactly are they talking about?"

Kylie looked over at me and gave me a look of exaggerated seriousness.

"Smart phones," she said. She mimicked an explosion with her



hands, smiling at me gleefully.
“Awesome, right?”

A chill went through me. My breath caught in my throat, and I gave Kylie a look of confusion. “What did you just say?”

“Smart phones,” Kylie repeated, shifting her gaze back to the television.

My eyes grew wide as I began to picture the cell-phone in my hand. I remembered it perfectly. It was wide, and rectangular. And then suddenly, it was thrown out of my hand just as forcefully as I was thrown by the car. We were spinning again. I saw flashes of the car, and then the sky. I blinked, and found myself back in my living room again. I still felt the cold of the snow nipping at the tip of my nose.

“Nevertheless, you’ve often talked about how technology can empower people, how it can change their lives. Do you still have as much faith in technology today as you did when you started out 20 years ago?” The interviewer continued. His voice seemed distant now, and the room started to feel cold. I looked over at Kylie to see if she felt it too, but she only seemed to be paying attention to the TV. Her eyes were sharp and focused, reminding me of the way she looked at her cell-phone in my dream.

My dream..... the one that would never happen. The one that could never happen. My heart began to beat faster, and the familiar throb started again in my head. My fingers began to scratch away at the fabric of my

couch, and I felt as if the air around me was closing in. This couldn’t be happening. That kind of technology could never possibly exist in the real world. It had all just been an absurd nightmare.

***“Technology is nothing.
What’s important is that you
have a faith in people-”***

We were suddenly in the mall again, surrounded by a sea of people who were all looking down at their phones. “Haven’t you heard? Infidelity is in this season.” Everyone hummed in agreement as they continued to text their lovers. They were still messaging away when they slowly vanished.

***“- that they’re basically good
and smart-”***



"That's just how things are." I was now in the middle of a circle of people who claimed to be my friends. At least, they considered themselves to be my friends because they followed all ten of my social media accounts. They stood there texting away on their phones, not bothering to talk or look at each other. Kylie was off to the side, passionately kissing a guy she had just met. Out of the corner of her eye, she winked at me. I wanted to tear the guy off of her, but I couldn't move. They all disappeared.

"-and if you give them tools-"

"Just stop! Stop!" I was screaming again, slamming my phone against the dashboard of a car I wasn't driving. It was going to crash in about a minute, yet I focused only on the ceaseless sound of buzzing that came from the phone. Bzzz, it went. Bzzz. "Damn you! Stop!" The car swiveled in that peculiar way, yet again.

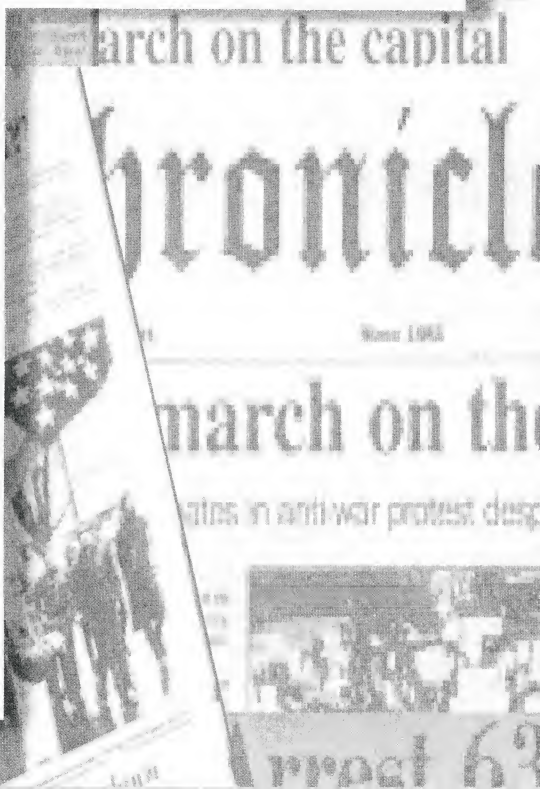
Instead of waking up from the dream like I had before, I found that it was no longer a dream. It wouldn't happen now, and it wouldn't happen tomorrow. But, I knew that it would happen soon. We would be looking down, and not forward. We would find ourselves living by a follower count and a mirror. I remembered the superficiality, and the infidelity, and the carelessness, and the self-deprecation, and the self-obsession. Those things would become our everything.

"-they'll do wonderful things with them."

I blinked and found myself transported back into my living room. Kylie sat next to me, smiling with wonder at the television.

"You hear that?" Kylie grinned at me. "We're going to do some wonderful things in the future."

I gave her a false smile. "Yup, wonderful things."



REGRETFUL AVOIDANCE

By T.J. Millspaugh

There were many days in my first period band class that felt like free periods. Be it the weekly sectionals where each section would "practice" whatever piece we were to be working on for the next concert, or the band director simply allowing us to use the time to study or socialize for whatever reason in the morning, I never complained. It was always nice to start the day without the pulsating beat of drums or high-pitched whistles of piccolos.

On one of these free period classes, I happened to overhear two classmates snickering loudly next to me. Being curious and unable to avoid hearing their indescribable banter, I asked the two what was so interesting. My classmate who was a year ahead filled me in on his brash weekend. In it, he described the so called "game" he played in his free time. Neglecting the uncouth detail, he told me of his escapades in which he threw objects, such as silverware, at the black residents around our small suburban town.

While simultaneously yelling derogatory insults, he told me of how he would so quickly flee each time. After he began describing the speed at which he had to run in order to escape the ensued reactions, just the simple retelling made the other boy burst out laughing once again.

I did not laugh. I could not laugh.

How could anyone laugh? What the heck? Though I barely knew the guy, I still wanted to reprimand him for how racist and discriminatory his actions were. Did he get enjoyment out of that crap? I wanted to say something that would imbue a sense of guilt or foolishness that would at least make him consider his actions.

"That's messed up." Was all I managed to say.

That was it. I just gave my disapproval and nothing else. What kind of strong ideal execution was that? I fear now that my actions were not enough, yet I



feared the consequences of starting conflict in the moment. I had done essentially nothing after hearing that the person sitting next to me was the source of such vulgarity. I knew that his actions were not right, but I did little to even show my opinion. Ruled by fear, I missed a chance to prove myself.

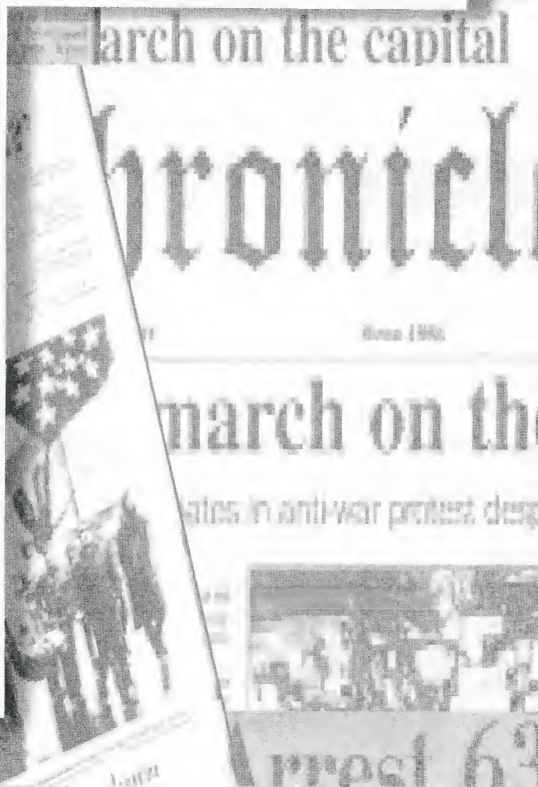
In the cold winter months of 2017, I was working with a small team of three people to repair the integrity of a two-car garage's concrete walls. Most times, it was just me and another male co-worker in the large, enclosed space. My role was to assist in his job of placing new cinderblocks to fill in a previous window. While using a chisel-like hammer to cleave the many required blocks to appropriate size, he and I went in and out of small talk. With only a few back and fourths, it became clear to me that my co-worker was not much for ideological contest. In other words, many times I did not agree to an idea he proposed, but to avoid conflict and keep the whole renovation project moving, I did not argue.

The silence that filled the room during each pause in the never-ending bouts of small talk was broken at one point with my co-worker asking me what I usually did for work. I replied and offered a follow-up question to keep the verbal tennis game going.

"How long have you been working with masonry and such?" I remember awkwardly phrasing.

The reply I received was full of dismay as he responded with least five years. This time, he continued the brief small talk into more of a monologue by changing topics with describing his past, specifically the high school years where he knew our current employer. He spoke nostalgically of the years that had passed with brief reflections about the classes he took, teachers he had, and his other fellow classmates. It was nice hearing some other's positive experiences from time to time.

However, the good feelings did not last, as he took a sudden turn in direction and he began to rant about what I understood as passionate social and racial opinions. He spoke sharply of how he saw his black classmates



being successful for what he called "free." I began internally wincing as he snidely remarked about how they all excelled in physical activities, like basketball and track and field, of which I could not even imagine him partaking in, claiming that it was the only cause of all their popularity.

While he continued on with remarks about how race had an apparent effect physical and economic capability, I realized that I really wanted to change topics as quickly as possible. I just wanted to get this job done while avoiding any potential negative repercussions from a possible argument. What if I said something that caused him to leave with the job incomplete? I was not a masonry expert; I was just there to help him out. If an argument caused by me cancelled the whole job I would have been devastated.

When he finished speaking, I knew that the verbal tennis game never stopped. It was my turn to return the shot forced at me.

"Huh." Was all I replied.

I was protecting myself with idle complacency towards discriminatory ideals. Is doing nothing any different than tolerating the racial prejudice around me? My lack of effective response to these micro-aggressions fills me with regret. Do my beliefs truly mean anything if I have done nothing to support them?

In a reality where collective wrongs do not make rights, my avoidance

has no significance in changing the actions and views of others who go against my own moral and social beliefs. Suppressed feelings alone will not right my wrongs, nor will they right the wrongs of another. I write to urge others who find themselves evading social conflict like I have to consider the future of their inaction. Avoiding confrontation brings momentary comfort, but a moment is all that is guaranteed. Will doing nothing in the face of social antagonism help push for change?

The future can only be changed with present action. Today's action is tomorrow's history. Do not give fear the chance to rule over change. Speak up.



ESCAPE

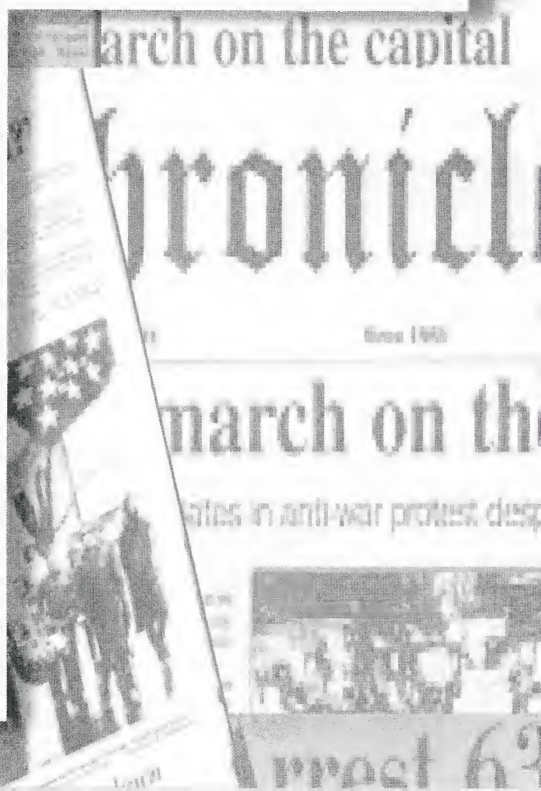
By Stefanie Dockery

Hold your breath. If you hold your breath and concentrate on exhaling really slow and then inhaling really slow and holding it again, you can shut out the rest of the world. You will hear the air going in and the silence of the hold, and then the air slowly going out. Nothing else matters, nothing else can penetrate this quiet place. It is my place, no one else aloud in, it is a place where being is not being and everything outside falls away, it is my sanctuary, my home.

I come to this place when I want to get away, and I have come to this place when I have to get away. Without this place, I would not survive. I do not know when or how I found this place, but I remember hearing once that necessity is the mother of invention. Does that mean I made this place for myself? Does it mean I knew I would need it so I built it brick by brick until it was the secure place it is? I have also heard God will never give you more than you can handle. Did God give me this place so I could continue to handle this world? Can God see me here? Can God hear me here; breathing? Or is this place a place even God cannot find? Hmmm; that is a thought, but God found Adam and Eve when they were hiding from him, how could I be so much more clever? Unless He is right, and there is no God; NO, I will not accept that; no God means it is all for nothing, no God means no hope. I

have to hold on to hope.

When I leave my place, the pain hits me. The pain comes in different ways, sometimes it is physical pain that prevents me from walking or moving, sometimes it is the hollow. The hollow is a pain all of its own, it is a pain that bleeds into every cell of your physical being and the bits of your mind that are exposed. The hollow is the pain that I fear. The physical pain gives you something to think about, the hollow steals every thought away. I teeter around the hollow, pushing up against the walls of the now. In the now I am afraid the hollow



will take all of me and I will never escape. In the hollow I want it to take all of me, I want to not be. I have to keep a firm grasp on the now. I have to watch my footing. I have to work for hope in the now, I have to keep it stored in me, like extra blankets on a shelf in a summer cottage. You don't put them on the bed because it is warm and you don't want them now, but you know that they will be important when the cool evening breeze sneaks in. That is the hope, the love, the stuff I store in me for the times in the hollow. But the worst part of the hollow is that He is there. He is there and He has no reason not to be his true self there. He does not have to pretend for others, it is only He and I there, and so He can be himself. He tells me all his truths, he is cruel, and I am his, all his. That is the worst part.

I used to dream about the days when I would leave here, leave Him. I would open the door and be blinded by the bright warm sunshine. I would throw my arms wide and breath a deep cleansing breath. I would put one foot in front of the other and I would walk away. I would smile, and I would keep walking, never looking back. Oh it was such a happy thought. I think that is what did me in, the joy I felt when I allowed myself this dream. I tried to keep it all for me, but He knows me. He must have seen.

I'll never leave now, and I don't allow myself to dream it anymore. I can't. What would happen to Them if I left? What would He do to them?

They are small and they are my responsibility. If I left, He would turn his attention to Them. No, I will never leave now. Maybe; maybe when They are grown and They leave, then I will leave; but that is a long way off, and there is no use in dreaming about it now. If I allow it He will see the joy, and He will find another way to take it. No, it is better not to dream, it is better not to allow the joy in, if you don't allow it, you will not miss it when He snatches it away. You will not feel the bitter sting. It is better to let the idea go. Accept your position, and find a way to move along.

I do have secret joys, the ones that He does not seem to care about. The ones that do not come from or even really involve me. The ones



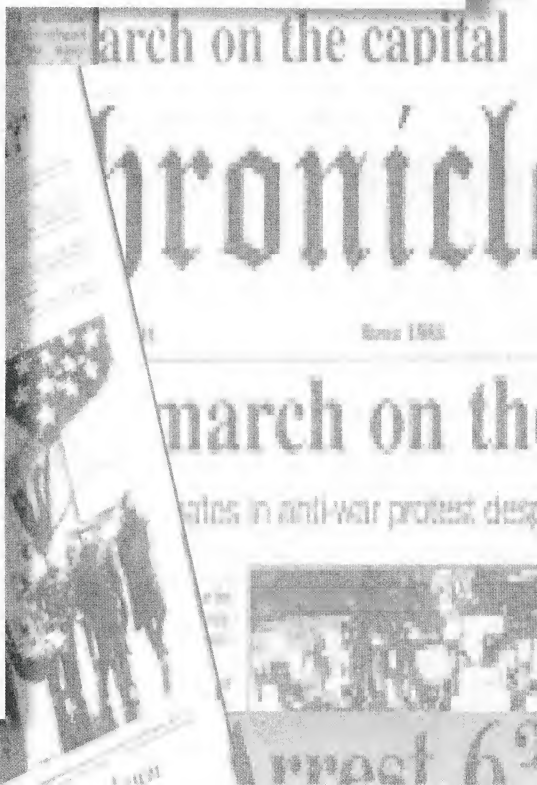
They come home with. Time with friends, jobs well done, contests won, awards earned, new loves, dreams of future. All these things bring me joys, the kind He allows. The kind that are not a threat to him. Even these I try not to get too excited about, for fear that He could ruin them if he sees they are important.

You may wonder how I came to be with him. That I am not sure of. I have always been with him. He has always been here. I am told that once I chose him. That they asked me did I want to be his, and I said yes. I have no memory of that. I have no memory of wanting to belong to anyone. I always just was. I do remember asking God to take me away from here, from him. He heard me and he laughed, told me to keep praying, that there was no God for me, there was only him. That was before they came.

I remember when the first one came. I hated the first one. So needy, another thing for me to worry about. Then the second one came. I don't know what it was about the coming of the second one, but after the second one came I stopped seeing them as problems and started seeing them as salvation. They brought me color, they brought me sound, they brought me taste, they brought me a new life. They were my reincarnation, my new being, my hope. I love them; I love them as much as is safe. I cannot love them too much, for if I do He will know, and I am never sure what He will do if he finds out. So I love them, I just love them in little pieces,

it keeps them safe. Someone once told me there is no middle ground with love, you either love them too much or not enough. I hope they always know that even if I don't love them the way they want or the way they deserve, that I love them the best I can. I have to keep them safe, I can only love them in pieces.

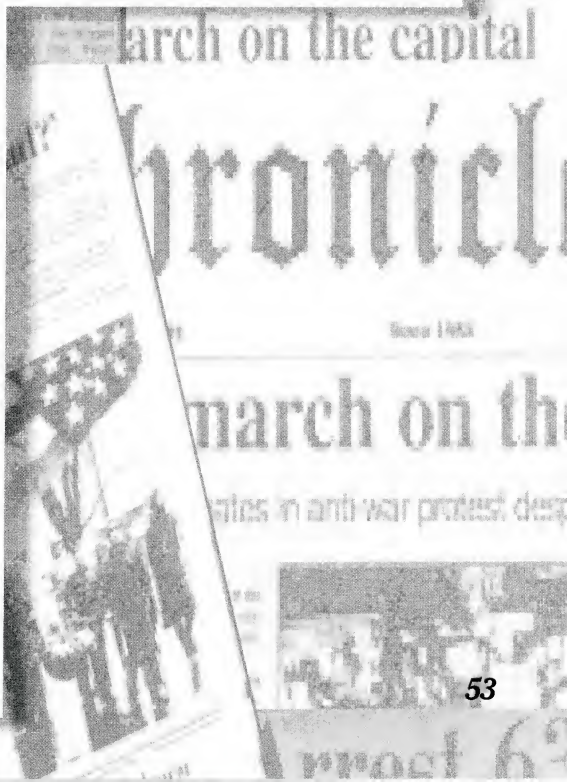
I think they love me, of course maybe it isn't love, but need. I am not sure. I know they need me. I know I fulfill a purpose in their lives. I think they love me. I know they pity me, I know they do not trust me, I know they think I am weak and useless. They are right. I am a creature to be pitied, I cannot seem to get out of my own way. I am not trustworthy, just ask Him. He will tell you all the things I have done or left undone, all the ways



I cannot be trusted to do anything right. I am weak and useless; I have been here too long to be anything else. I do have one power though, I can keep him away from them, I can keep them safe. As long as I remember that I can do that, all I need to do. I think they love me.

Someday they will leave here. Someday they will find a way of their own and they will leave here. They will be free, they will be free to love and be loved wholly, not just in pieces. Someday. I think I may miss them when they leave. I will try not to. I hope they leave, blinded by the bright sun, arms open wide, smelling the fresh air, one foot in front of the other, never looking back.

Hold your breath. If you hold your breath and concentrate on exhaling really slow and then inhaling really slow and holding it again you can shut out the rest of the world. You will hear the air going in and the silence of the hold, and then the air slowly going out. Nothing else matters, nothing else can penetrate this quiet place. I wonder, does God know where this place is?



NO CONTROL

By Nadia Trejo

She told me that's the type of "boy" I should be dating... smart, athletic, and good looking. I should have known, every guy my mother has ever liked has hurt me, wasn't good for me, and left a negative mark. She's never had good taste in men.

He was popular, played varsity volleyball since 10th grade, took all AP classes, and I never heard anything bad about him. He was into me, and I knew it.

After a bad summer between my mother and I, I needed to show her I listened to her advice, so I said yes to ice cream with him. He had been asking to "hang out" for months and the answer was always no. But my mother liked him, so maybe she'd respect me if I gave him a chance; so I said yes. Summer was just ending, so we planned to get ice cream that night while there was still daylight. He suggested we go to a park, somewhere to walk around. We went where I felt safe, where I spent most of my childhood at, an elementary school with swings, a baseball field and a slide. We walked, and the sun began going down and it got darker and darker. He started talking about the movie "IT" and I started to get scared of an imaginary clown. We laughed and kept walking until we got to the baseball field, where he kissed me. I let him, a kiss is innocent, and I can stop a kiss. I thought I was the one in control.

He pushed me, and I felt nervous, then was the first time I said to him "we should go." I assumed he didn't hear me because he turned me around, so my back was facing him. I turned back to face him and said no clearer this time. He kissed me again and I started to get scared. What had I gotten myself into, who is he? He turned me around again and tried pulling my pants down, but they're skinny jeans, and I wear them any time I go anywhere with a guy for a reason. So he turned me back around and I grabbed his hand and said "let's go." He said "wait." I was between an 8-foot chain linked fence, and a 6'2, 180lbs athlete.



He pushed me down, I don't think he realized what he was doing, but I did.

I thought of ways to get out of this, to get away. I can run, but what if he gets mad and hits me. It's dark and I can't just run home, it's 5 blocks away and a 20-minute walk in the day time. He has the car. What if he gets mad? I can't run. It's my fault I can't get away. I bit him, over and over and over again but he would just push me against the fence more. So I sat there crying but not loud enough for him to hear. I didn't want him to get mad, I was scared for him to get mad. I just wanted to get out okay.

We walked back to his car, I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what just happened. But I should've known, and I should have just stayed home.

A silver, Honda Civic. He loves that car, posted pictures of it on social media constantly. He had white rosary beads hanging from his rear-view mirror, the same ones I also had in my bed room. He had a good taste in music. And I sat in that car. In complete silence.

We didn't even get ice cream.

I got home, went to my room as quickly as possible so my parents didn't see the mascara that was all down my cheeks. I was mortified. How could I let something like this happen to me? I couldn't even look at myself in the mirror, who I thought I was, everything I knew was all a lie. I should have known.

The next morning, I snapchatted him. I had so many questions, and I wanted to talk to him. The message said "pending." He blocked me. His best friend later asked me that day "did you guys hookup... he told me he blocked you." How do I respond to that? What do I say? Yes, we hooked up. No, he raped me. I couldn't even say the words, so I just said okay. I was mortified.

I talked to my friend 2 weeks later, vaguely about what happened that night. She told me about that Honda Civic, those rosary beads, and ice cream. Only she got ice cream, and she also got away. She got out of his car and went home. How was she able to get away? She's more attractive and smaller than me. Why couldn't I get away,



why wasn't I braver?

I blocked those around me, those who cared about me, shut out everyone. I wore big baggy clothes and my dad's messy work sweatshirts. No tank tops, no crop tops, no leggings unless I wore a sweatshirt that covered me. I didn't want the attention. I fell off the deep end. I took on 3 jobs, buried myself in work, stayed away from home, drove around listening to the same 5 songs on repeat. Fell back in school work. Gave up on any thoughts of college. Why worry about life beyond high school when I didn't want to live anymore? I shut out everyone for what felt like a decade but was only a month. I didn't know what was going on and didn't care about anything anymore. I was lost.

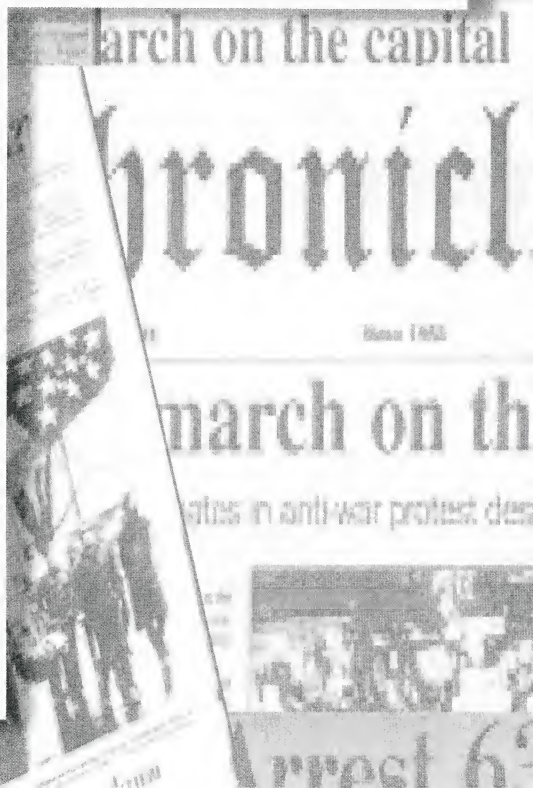
I don't know why, but after a month of crying myself to sleep nearly every night something clicked. I reached out to my best friend, the only person who ever protected me. He questioned me in disbelief and was furious that not only had I stopped speaking to him for a month, but that when I finally did reach out, this was the first thing I said. It was a long night, but the next morning I still went to school. I felt better, I felt okay, I felt safe again.

I needed help, so that day I went to my teacher, who I trusted with everything, and I told her what happened. She told me I was assaulted and that I should talk to someone, that I should get professional help. She gave me a few

numbers for different therapists. So that meant I'd have to tell my mother. When I told her, it felt nearly as bad as the actual assault.

She didn't believe me, thought it was stupid, and got mad at me for telling her at such an inconvenient time. She yelled and yelled and demanded I tell her who it was. I refused to tell her. I knew if I came out about this and people at school found out, they'd call me a liar, make fun of me, and hate me even more than they did. So, she kept yelling, and I kept quiet.

A month later, I had an appointment to talk to someone. The day before my first appointment, he unblocked me and messaged me. I cried, I was scared all over again. He said "hey, can I



ask you a question?" I said no and blocked him. I laid in bed crying. I had a million questions 2 months ago and you denied me all of them. I will not let you ask any questions; you will not speak to me. I never stopped crying.

It took me another month of therapy to even say the word assault, I had been calling it "the incident" or "the thing" and "you know" all this time. I was feeling better. I wasn't scared anymore; I didn't hide my face or walk in the opposite direction of him in the hall. I was just angry towards him all the time. I saw his face and wanted to punch it. I would see that Honda Civic, and it took every bone in my body not to smash his windshield or key his car. I would sit in class thinking about the best way to get revenge and hurt him the way he hurt me. A new windshield is expensive but easily fixable. Keying a car is expensive but easily fixable. Slashing all of his tires is expensive but easily fixable. Everything was easily fixable, everything but me.

He took a part of me that day and I may never have it back. Time heals some wounds, but not all. Learning how to trust myself again, and trying to find little things in my life I have control over have helped me put the pieces back together.



GLITTERING GLASS

By Tabitha Moyer

Was this my life? Was it true? Was I a person anymore? I had lost twenty pounds. I lost my mind. I lost myself.

Standing there, with my eyes closed, I did what was asked of me. I responded the way he told me to. Most importantly, I never spoke against him.

He sat there on a blue bucket, watching me fall before his knees. Knowing he was the king of this kingdom in which he was building for himself. He grabbed me. Slid his hands up my thighs. Felt my skin. Forced me to moan for him. It was his pleasure. It was about making him happy and pleased.

I was yelled at when I wore something other than short Nike shorts.

And his hands went to places they shouldn't have been.

As I stood facing the other way from him, I could almost hear him madly chuckle to himself, as if his plan was working all along, with no one getting in his way. I just stood there, frozen beyond disbelief.

I was offered alcohol. I was offered to be taken up to his hotel room.

The shower was particularly warm that bitter raw night. The heavily streaming water hitting my tear stained face. As I laid down on the shower floor, the water now hit my thighs. I was too tall to lay down with my legs straight out. So, I turned on my side, facing the wall that didn't have the shower curtain pulled across.

The warm lighting in the bathroom made it the color coral orange. The shower walls were a cream white. As the water slowly rose, I felt my tears streaming down the shattered shell that was once my body. I had nothing. I did nothing to save myself. I destroyed my own



life. I let this happen to me. I am a fucking piece of shit that nobody would ever want. Who would want a fucked-up bitch who was abused and depressed? Not even my family wanted me. I knew nobody would check on me, nobody ever did anymore. I was alone. I was done. I did not want to live anymore.

The water started to move into my mouth. I just laid there unable to move, not wanting to either.

I am numb. What is that feeling you may ask? Where you feel like you have lost control over everything, such as what you think, feel, and do. Everything I was doing was being controlled by the words he used against me. I did not mean to let it happen, and to be clear nobody ever just lets it happen to them or asks for it. The colors you see every day become dull. When your vision is completely clear, but your mind is so foggy it makes your head extremely heavy. It is inescapable. It is as if I am drowning, gasping for air as hands strangle me underneath the water.

More often than not, I was not engaged in the world around me. I traveled to my bubble off in a land where nobody could touch, harm, and speak to me. It was filled with soft luscious white sand that did not stick to my skin. A colorful vibrant rainbow could be seen off behind

the swaying green palm trees. The sound of the easy-going waves crashing against the shore. The sound of the water is so peaceful that if you were to lay back your head on the bed of sand you would fall asleep. Walking on the wet sand while the feeling of waves goes below the bottom of your feet, it feels like stepping on a waterbed. Also, to top it off, the smell of the salty air from the ocean and having the beach knotted hair makes it all perfect. This is my happiness. Not only the daytime was perfect in the bubble of mine, but at night you can see the clusters of stars lost in space that are a trillion miles away. Since I am all alone in my bubble, I can almost hear the stars laughing at me and I am giggling with the stars. They guide me and help me feel alive. I often forget what



it feels like to be alive, and when I have something that brings me back to life, it is a feeling of breathing in fresh cold air into your lungs and the chills that travel from the top of your head to your spine to the toes on your feet. Once I exit the bubble of mine, I know soon I will enter it again for I am not happy out here in this life of mine.

*When something is smashed,
And if the broken pieces are big
enough, it can be fixed.
But when the light is let in
Broken glass with glitter
And in those moments
When the golden rays
from the sun shines
The pieces of what I was
will catch the sun
I'll remember
how beautiful life was
Just how magnificent
it will always be.
Because it was my unbroken soul.
And it will forever be marvelous
And when it doesn't hurt anymore,
that's when I am free
of this pain and suffering.*

*So, may I just have one more hug
I won't say a word,
and then I'll go
Maybe just one more laugh,
one more kiss,
and one more I love you.
And in between those one more's,
we can lay beneath the sky
remembering all the times
that I was happy.
I won't ask for more*

I'll be genuinely happy and calm.

*And maybe, then just maybe, all
the one mores will suspend time in
the world of the damaged and the
unknown.*

I would like to say my story has a "happy ending", but in this story there is no such thing as a "happy ending". Since the day I admitted to being sexually abused, December 23rd, 2018, to this day, November 20th, 2019, I have come a long way, but I still have my entire life to become myself again, and then working on a better version of myself.

Telling people my story is not my biggest fear in life, it is that they



will not see or hear the sadness in my voice and face. They will neglect to notice that I am struggling to breathe. They will sit there and applaud me for being so brave and for not letting him have power anymore. I do not decide to tell this to audiences to get a reaction of being praised. I tell them because this is my life, that this is real, that I struggle to breathe every day, and that I am in constant fear of my own life. Yes, I am not fearful for my life, I am fearful of my life and what it will be able to do to me. My voice is my way, my only way, to share my story, to not ignore the impact mental health and illnesses can have on people. Additionally to show what I can become of this and that there is hope, even if I am not able to feel it.

I am not my story, but my story is a part of me.

My soul has been shattered, I am numb, and I am grasping for hope every day.



HERE'S THE THING

By Jesse Zhao

North Penn High School

11-12th Grade

1st Place

Here's the thing-the thing about eyes.

I don't really get how most people appreciate 'em.

For a long while, I never understood the big deal around them. It seemed like everywhere I looked, there was something or another calling them into focus. You ever see a makeup ad for lipstick or whatever that has a few seconds dedicated to a dramatic, mascara-clumpy eyelash bat? How about reading a book, and a few lines are pulled aside and dedicated to the love interest's ice-blue irises, which somehow contain as much a world as a very fancy snow globe? A fancy pan-up in the movies to take a look at some hotshot's squint.

It's stupid. There, I said it. It's stupid. Eyes are gelatinous balloons of nerves and organic sludge, with a long fleshy root of muscle and a tiny cavity for a lens and pupil. You can't read entire emotions just from eyes. You read emotions from the eyebrows and the face around them, but there's a reason eyes are described as 'glassy' at death. The glassiness is distracted from by the facial expressions of the living.

Call me mean if you want, but don't

say I haven't tried. When I noticed all the "windows to the soul" nonsense when I was younger, I stared at nothing but eyes on a face in conversations. Sure, I was young and dumb and scared of sticking out too much, so I really did try to get why people think they're so neat and all that. I guess the colors are nice, but if you want color go to an art museum. Color has nothing to do if someone is angry or sad. And besides, if it's color you're so into, what's the deal with eyeshadow?

I am sick. To death. Of eyes. No, that's not quite true. I am sick of the unneeded attention and dramatization around eyes. There are so many books that would



otherwise be good, great even, if a cliché paragraph wasn't dedicated to 'piercing frosty blues', 'warm chocolate browns', or 'sparkling emerald greens'. I can't even get through them if that paragraph gets so much as hinted at anymore. So sue me if I don't get it, if I'm getting frustrated with this one little description that makes no damn sense, but it's like writers can't focus on any other body part to give away some kind of emotion. Try a hand gesture! Try a nervous tic! Hell, try a smile! Not like we use our mouths for everything from eating to talking to breathing to kissing. You're more likely to notice the broccoli in your first date's teeth than the lovely "bluish-brownish-greenish-color of their iris hues".

In the end, an eye is an eye and is about as capable as emoting as a souvenir teaspoon. Just another organ sitting in our body doing one job. Next we'll be reading stomach gurgles and deciding a digestive whale call is the equivalent of an invitation to fight or kiss. At least a stomach gurgle tells you something. And if pink's your favorite color, then by that logic it'll be nice on the eyes to cut a stomach out and look at it directly under the light, right?

'Nice on the eyes.' Heh.

Listen, take it from me. What do eyes tell you about a person? Nothing. But if you really want to appreciate someone's eyes? Really wanna see the beautiful emotion that everyone pretends is there? Finally look through those 'windows to the soul'?

You gotta take away the rest of the picture. You wouldn't stare at a pearl inside an oyster, you gotta crack open the shell and cut it out of all that twitchy, stinking flesh before stringing it on a thread, maybe hanging it on a pretty lady's neck.

Yeah, I gotta hand it to the folks who came up with formaldehyde. It used to be that I'd just sit around with a balloon of gel in a glass jar until it deflated like a rotten pumpkin, now they look as good as the day I cut them out of their owners' heads. I've even mastered keeping the root intact, y'see that? And the marbling the red veins make on the white sclera really gives it a nice touch. How's that for color, huh?



So I still can't get the big hullabaloo around eyes. I still hate the unnecessary dramatization around them. But I suppose that's alright, I don't need to appreciate them the way other people do. I've got my own unconventional manner.

And sometimes, if I do it right, I can see emotion in those eyes too. And preserve that shrink-pupil-ed fear forever.



BULLETS AND BLANKS

By Paige Realí

*Berks Catholic High School
11-12th Grade
2nd Place*

Gunshots shatter the silence.

A scream pierces the air—sharp, loud, and quickly silenced. I know the kind.

I fumble for my gun, my fingers sliding into the well-worn grooves. It fits perfectly, just like it has since the day Jakob gave it to me. With my other hand, I reach for the radio and call for help. The dispatcher tells me backup is approximately ten minutes away. Gunshot victims might not have that long.

I take a deep breath and step out of the patrol car. A single streetlight splashes on the asphalt, weakly flickering against the shadows. Heavy footsteps cut across the night. They're not mine.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. A throbbing cold washes through my body, curling around my intestines. For the first time in my career, someone else has a gun. I am not naive enough to think they won't use it.

An alleyway is tucked against the edge of the streetlight. I creep along the wall of the building next to it. Ragged breathing echoes against the brick. I swallow hard, barely daring

to breathe. Carefully, I peer around the corner.

A wet mass lays in the center of the alleyway, crimson liquid pooling on the trash-littered floor. Off to the side, a man leans heavily against a broken shopping cart.

Adrenaline drenches my systems. My fingers shake around the handle of my gun. It is only my training that keeps my mind clear and calm. In one fluid motion, I step from my hiding spot, leveling my gun at the suspect.

"Drop your weapon!"

Before the words are finished



echoing, the man has his own gun trained on me, his grip sure and professional.

Shit.

I open my mouth, but the words dry up as streetlight washes over the gunman. His nose twists to the left, his upper lip contorting gruesomely from a fat scar. Pepper and salt stubble speckles his jaw.

I can't stop staring at the abused features. It is a startling sight, one that turns heads in a crowd for all the wrong reasons.

I do not stare because of his appearance. I stare because I know that face.

"Johnny?" I breathe.

The man meets my gaze, and suddenly, I am fourteen again.

I remember reaching for the light switch, freezing as the dull lighting washed over the room. I did not see the blood spatter along the walls, the broken plates on the floor, the tilted chairs, the splintered doorframe. I saw my parents' lifeless forms.

They laid in front of me, their bodies mannequin-like. Mother's hair was splayed out behind her, soaking in a sticky red. Father's head lolled to the side, his eyes as cold and murky as frozen pond water.

Slowly, I sank to the tile, tremors racking my body. Fear crawled up my spine and around my throat, choking me.

A hand pressed against my shoulder. I flinched away violently, tumbling to the side, my hands sliding through half-congealed blood. Gasping, I forced myself to look up.

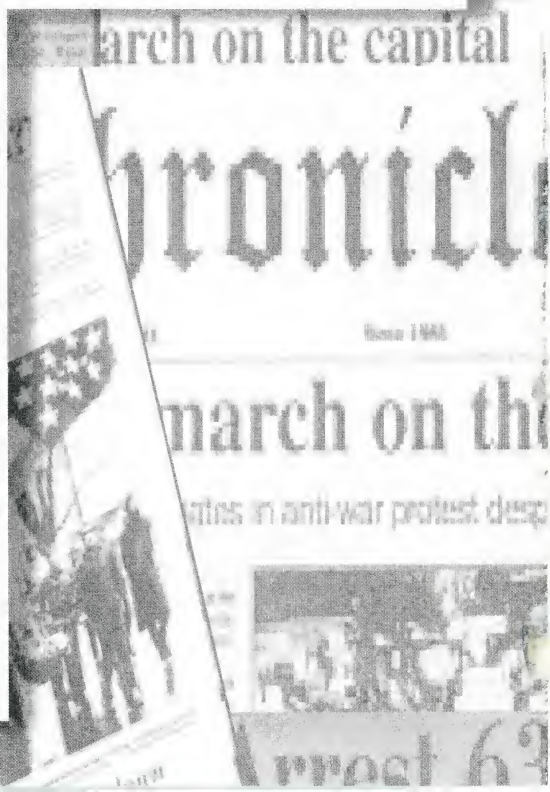
Johnny's face stared back at me, his skin pale and eyes horrified.

"Help," I choked out.

Without another word, my father's friend grabbed me and pulled me out of the nightmare.

Later, after things had settled down, Johnny returned home late one night. He closed the door quietly, almost as if he was afraid to find me sleeping. He needn't have bothered. I didn't sleep much during those first few months.

"Johnny?" I called from the couch.



He turned stiffly, and I swallowed hard. He looked like he'd been in a fight. His nose bent to the left, his eyes were bruised, and a thin cut sliced from the edge of his nose to the middle of his upper lip.

Johnny limped over to me, the pale light of the muted TV casting shadows across part of his face. Wincing, he bent down in front of me. The brown of his eyes were hard and cold.

He handed me a wedding band. It was made of a heavy gold, the size too big for my fingers. But I would know it anywhere.

I looked up at Johnny, my eyes wide. "This was Dad's," I whispered.

He nodded. Then, he pressed his gun into my hands. "Take this, Leon."

The metal was lighter than it had been before, the magazine empty. I curled my fingers around it, understanding the gravity.

Johnny swallowed hard. "Get the hell out of here, Leon."

I flinched sharply.

"This ain't no life for you. Killing people because they killed some of yours. Somebody gotta do it, but that somebody ain't gonna be you."

I nodded warily, drawing the gun closer to my chest. Johnny didn't seem to notice.

"I want you off these streets, away from these people. You ain't gonna be me kid. Hell, I don't wanna be me." His hard eyes met mine.

"You're better than this place, Leon. You're better than me."

I stared at him, my knuckles white around the gun.

Johnny lunged forward, grabbing my shoulders hard enough to bruise. His eyes burned holes through my skull. "Promise me, Leon."

I swallowed. "I promise."

I drag myself back into reality, shivering.

"Leon?" Johnny strings out.

"It's me," I say.

Johnny doesn't lower his gun. Neither do I.



"What're you doin' here, kid?"

"Patrol," I say, dazed.

He nods as if it makes perfect sense.

"So you made something of yourself. I always knew you'd get out."

"What are you doing here, Johnny?"

My knuckles are white around my gun. Sweat slicks my skin.

"This ol' boy here?" Johnny toes the corpse absently. "He murdered a brother of ours. I returned the favor. You know how it is. Somebody gotta do it. You ain't gonna rat me out, are you?"

"I thought you wanted me to be better than you," I say, my voice barely more than a whisper.

Johnny nods. "You are. You didn't kill him, Leon. Just keep your trap shut. Say you stumbled on him and the killer got away."

It would be easy enough, I realize. Given ten minutes, I know Johnny can find a hole to ride out the storm. I can say the killer ran before I arrived on the scene. It would only cost my integrity, turn me into a crooked cop.

But I owe Johnny. He took me in, kept me out of gangs and drugs, slaved away so that I could go to college. He protected me from a life that no one protected him from. He gave me a chance to escape, to become something. It is a debt I have to pay, one I want to pay for the man who became my father.

It is a life for a life.

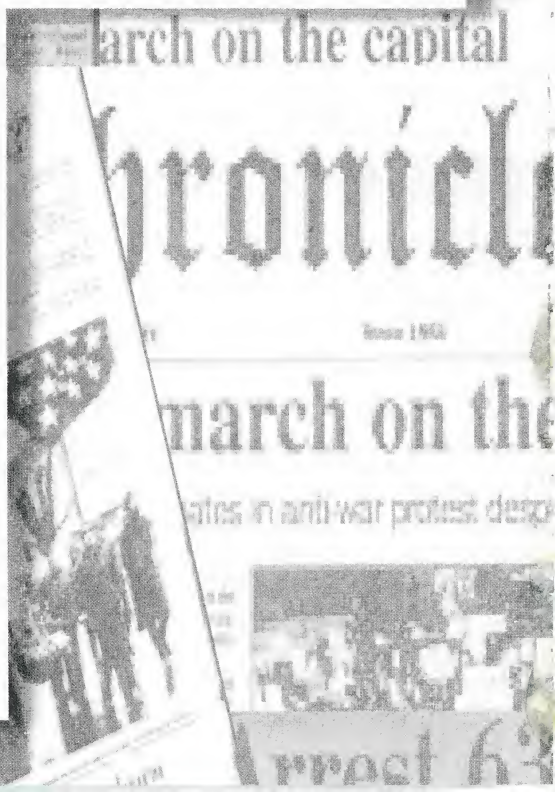
I look down at the dead man, his

eyes clouded over and murky like my father's. A gold wedding ring glints on his left hand. My father's ring burns on my own finger, and suddenly, I'm fourteen, sliding through my parents' blood.

I feel sick, my stomach twisting itself inside out. That man has a family, kids maybe. Are they up late, waiting for someone who is never coming home? Or worse, will they see his stinking corpse on the news?

"You're better than me," Johnny had said.

"I can't let you." The words are out of my mouth before I even realize it, but I know I will not take them back. I became a police officer to help people, to stop murderers from destroying lives. My grip tightens



on the trigger. I refuse to sacrifice my purpose for anything or anyone, not even Johnny.

His eyes are hard and cold. "You don't mean that, Leon."

"You're a murderer, Johnny. How does that make you better than the people who killed my parents? That man has a family!" I say, fury arcing through my veins.

The wrinkles on Johnny's face are as deep as canyons. He sighs. "Look, kid, you were never supposed to see this."

"That doesn't matter. You murdered him," I grit out.

He is silent. Our shadows cast specters along the walls of the alleyway, grim reapers waiting for the final sentence.

"Put down your weapon, Johnny. I don't want to hurt you."

Slowly, Johnny lowers his gun and sighs.

Carefully, I do the same, though I do not relax my grip. I watch as Johnny makes his way over to me, his footsteps echoing through the night.

He stops inches from me, his face hard and unreadable.

"You won't regret this," I say.

Johnny shakes his head, and he sounds almost sad as he says, "That's where you're wrong, kid."

Johnny lunges forward, slamming his knife into my side.

The blade rips into my ribs easily.

Agony shoots through my body. I crumble to the ground, too shocked to cry out.

Johnny stands over me, his eyes alight with determination and bloodlust. His lips curl into a snarl. It is the look of a survivor, of a man accustomed to the life he saved me from.

We raise our guns at the same time. I look into his hard eyes one last time.

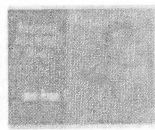
I wonder which one of us is justified. The man who saved the boy from becoming a killer, or the boy who tried to save the killer from himself.

Gunshots shatter the silence.



Editors evaluate submissions for each category through a blind review process. No staff members were within six feet of each other during the production of this issue.

Biggest t War

[illegible]

Received February 12, 1994


capital

rich

Keywords: child sexual abuse; disclosure; self-blame

on the
year protest days

***Craig Bach
Allison Black
Dr. Tanya Casas
Patrick Kelly
Brenda Lazarus
Dr. Linda Maisel
Doug McCambridge
Ryan Stewart***



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